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A Study on the Rigvedic Society

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Abstract

There is a significant need to understand our ancient literature, such as the Vedas, to cultivate a positive attitude toward our surroundings. The *Rigveda* is not only the oldest *Veda* among the four Vedas but also serves as a vital source of ancient knowledge and wisdom. The mantras of the *Rigveda* may not appear as refined or lyrical as the verses of Kalidasa, yet when we read them with the intent to discover our truth, traditions, and ancestral heritage, they begin to resonate with us. The *Rigveda* offers a vivid portrayal of ancient Indian society. Its hymns shed light on the social structure of the Rigvedic era and provide deep insight into the social, economic, and religious life of that time. This research paper explores various aspects of the Rigvedic period, including its holistic education system, the cordial teacher-student relationship, economic conditions, dignified marriage customs, and the equal status of women in society. Women actively took part in religious ceremonies and rituals alongside their husbands. People of that era worshipped deities who primarily represented natural forces. Through a careful analysis of the *Rigveda*, this paper presents detailed information about Rigvedic society. In today's fast-paced world, focusing on ancient texts has become increasingly difficult due to constant distractions. However, this research paper aims to offer at least a basic understanding of the Rigvedic age to the readers and also reflects how the morals and ethics conserved in the *Rigveda* stay appropriate even today.

Keywords: Rigveda, Society, Mantra, Family, Varna, Hymns, Vedic Period, Education, Marriage, Ancestors, Religion

Introduction:

The word *Veda* originates from the Sanskrit root *vid*, which means "to know," and therefore, *Veda* essentially means "knowledge." It is regarded as the most sacred and ancient text in Hindu literature. Many scholars have defined the *Veda* in various ways. For example, in *Rigveda Bhasya Bhumiya*, Swami Dayananda Saraswati explained that the term *Veda* can be derived from four different meanings of *vid*: to know, to exist, to discriminate, and to obtain or acquire.

In Aitareya Brahmana, there is a verse-

*"Pratyakṣenānumityā vā yastupāyo na vidyate /
Enam vidanti vedena tasmād vedasya vedatā //"*

(*Rigved ki Shankhyān Shakha*, Prof. Amal Dhari Singh, Page no. 2)

This means that knowledge which cannot be acquired through direct perception or inference can be attained only through the *Veda*. Similarly, Manu declared, "*Vedokhilo dharmamūlam*," implying that *dharmā* (righteous duty) has its roots in the Vedas.

The Vedas are referred to by several names, including *Śruti*, *Trayi-vidyā*, and *Āgama*. Traditionally, there are four Vedas: the *Rigveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Samaveda*, and *Atharvaveda*. Among them, the oldest *Veda* is *Rigveda*. The *Rigveda*, *Samaveda*, and *Yajurveda* together are collectively known as the '*Trayi*' or '*Veda Trayi*', meaning the threefold *Veda*. The *Atharvaveda*, sometimes called *Atharvāṅgiras* in its oldest form, was added later.

Among these, the *Rigveda* holds a prominent place as the earliest and most revered text, offering insights into early Vedic civilization. The hymns of the *Rigveda*, along with those in the other three Vedas, were not merely religious chants—they also reflected the social, cultural, and economic aspects of that era. The *Rigveda* serves as a mirror to ancient Indian society, revealing details about family structures, economic practices, occupations, rituals, education, marriage customs, and the status of women. It provides valuable glimpses into how our ancestors lived, thought, worshipped, and organized their communities. For students and scholars alike, studying the *Rigveda* is essential for developing a clear and informed understanding of India's ancient civilization.

Rigvedic Literature:

The *Rigveda* is known as the earliest *Veda* and it is called as '*Apaurusheya*', meaning, the Vedas are not composed by human beings. Though the western scholars do not believe this, yet they accept that this is the earliest book in ancient India. Macdonell said about it in his book '*A Vedic Reader for Students*' that-

"The *Rigveda* is undoubtedly the oldest literary Monument of the Indo-European Language."

Jaimini defined "*Rik*" as - '*Tesam rik arthavasena padabyavastha*', meaning, '*Rik*' are the mantras of the Vedas that have *chhanda* (meters) and lines according to their meaning.

The *Rigveda* is traditionally classified into two structural systems. The first system organizes it into *Maṇḍala*, *Anuvāka*, *Sūkta*, and *Ṛk*; the second system arranges it into *Aṣṭaka*, *Adhyāya*, *Varga*, and *Mantra*. The *Rigveda* is composed of 10 *Maṇḍalas*, 85 *Anuvākas*, 1,028 *Sūktas*, 8 *Aṣṭakas*, 68 *Adhyāyas*, 2,006 *Vargas*, and a total of 10,552 Mantras. Over the centuries, many recensions have been lost. According to the *Charaṇavyuha* attributed to Śaunaka, five primary recensions were once known: *Śākala*, *Bāṣkala*, *Aśvalāyana*, *Śāṅkhāyana*, and *Maṇḍūkya*. According to the *Śākala* recension, the *Rigveda Saṃhitā* contains 1,017 *Sūktas*, while the *Bāṣkala* recension includes 1,028, with 11 additional hymns known as the *Bālakhilya Sūktas*. Today, only the *Śākala* recension has survived in complete form.

Amid the four Vedas, the *Rigveda* deserves to be called as the most important of the Vedas, as it is the most extensive collection of Vedic hymns. Each of the four Vedas is further divided into four parts: the *Samhitā*, *Brāhmaṇa*, *Āraṇyaka*, and *Upaniṣad*. *Samhitā* means a collection of the hymns. Each *Veda* except *Yajurveda* has one *Samhitā*, while *Yajurveda* has two, they are *Shukla* and *Krishna*. Similarly, each *Veda* possesses its own *Brahmans*, *Aranyakas* and *Upanishads*. *Rigveda* has two *Brahmanas*—*Aitareya Brahmana* and *Kaushitaki Brahmana*; Two *Aranyakas*—*Aitareya Aranyaka* and *Kaushitaki Aranyaka*; and Two *Upanishads*—*Aitareyopanishad* and *Kaushitaki Upanishad*.

The *Rigveda* consists of many types of hymns, such as –*Devastuti*, *Samvada Suktas*, *Apri Hymns*, The Wedding Hymns, Didactic Hymns etc. In the *Rigveda*, we came across various mantras praising the Gods, like *Agni*, *Indra*, *Savitri*, *Soma* etc; these mantras are called as *Devastuti*. The *Rigveda* begins with *Agni* hymns-

*“Agnimille purohitam yajnasya devamritvijam /
Hotaram ratnadhatamam //”*

(The New Vedic selection, Part-1,
Telang Braj & Bihari Chaubey, Page no-2)

The *Rigveda* has twenty dialogue hymns (*Samvada Sukta*) and among these hymns, *Pururava* and *Urvasi* hymn is famous. The *Rigveda* has also some philosophical Hymns and some of these hymns are- *Vac* hymn, *Purusa* hymn, *Hiranyagarbha* hymn, *Nasadiya* hymn, *Bhava* hymn etc.

Society Reflected in The Rigveda:

The society which is reflected in the *Rigveda*, presents a picture of early Vedic society, which was very rich from all the aspects. Although concrete evidence about the people of the Vedic period is limited, the mention of the word ‘*Ganga*’ in the final *Maṇḍala* of the *Rigveda* suggests that settlements may have existed along the banks of the *Ganga* River. References to settlements such as “villages” and “cities” also appear in the *Rigveda*. Notably, the term *Grāma* (village) is found in the first *Maṇḍala* of the text.

*“Ima rudraya tavase kapardine ksayadviraya prabharamahe matih /
Yatha samasaddvipade chatuspade viswanm pustam
grame asminnanaturam //”*
(*Rigveda*, Mandal-1, Sukta-114, Mantra-1)

In the Rigvedic period, cattle rearing was the main occupation of the Aryas. But gradually it shifted to agriculture, as they lived near the *Ganga* River, so it could be easy to grow crops and harvest them. Other than this, they also engaged in chariot making, road construction work, gold making, rope making, iron making, weapon making etc. for their living. People used meat as their food in that period and they also offered meat in some sacrifices.

During the Rigvedic period, families were known as ‘*kula*’. The family structure was primarily patriarchal, where the head of the family was the eldest member of the family. He made every decision of the family. He also controlled over the family properties. From the various stories, we came across that the father had all the power over his children. And one very interesting thing is that, caste division in that period was based on their professions, not on their birth. Actually, *Brahmans* divided the people according to their professions. But in later period, caste system increased in society and people were divided on the basis of their birth. This caste system (*varnas*) is classified into four sections; they were- *Brahmanas*, *Ksatriyas*, *Vaishyas*, and *Shudras*. In *Purusha sukta* of the *Rigveda*, the name of these *Varnas* were mentioned in this way-

*“Brahmano asya mukhamasid bahu rajanya kritah /
Uru tadasya yadvaishya padmyam sudro ajayatah //”*
(New Vedic Selection, part 1,
Telang Braj & Bihari Chaubey, Page no- 231)

Role of women:

During the Rigvedic era, women held an important place in society. Except the *Sudras*, other three *Varnas* got the chances to read the Vedas and educate themselves. Therefore, these women became highly educated and knowledgeable. During the Rigvedic period, women obtained equal opportunities like men to go to the public occasions, festivals, and they even actively participated in such occasions. One particularly interesting point is, women in that period of time were also permitted to perform sacrifices along with their husband. 'Patyurnah yajnasamyoge' in this *sutra*, Panini says that a sacrifice cannot be performed without his wife. So, from this evidence, we can assume the importance of women during that period. The term '*dampati*' referred collectively to both husband and wife, reflecting their equal roles and shared responsibilities in managing household affairs.

During that time, women from the three upper *varnas* were also granted the '*lagun*' and participated in Vedic rituals, chanting the *GayatriMantra* alongside men. These learned women were known as *Vidusis*. Vedic literature mentions several such knowledgeable women. Among them, Gargi stands out as a prominent scholar of that era. Renowned for her intellect and learning, she was often regarded as a leading female figure in the spiritual and philosophical discourse of her time. In the *Rigveda*, numerous names of women scholars were mentioned who composed many verses of the *Rigveda*, such as, Apala, Romasha, Lopamudra, Ghosa, Biswabara, Kamayani etc. These women were called '*Brahmabadini*' in '*Brihat-Devata*' and '*Rishikas*' in the '*Rigveda*'. Women in that period, mainly choose 'Teacher' as their profession and other than these, they engaged in needle work, flower arrangement, dancing, sewing etc. We also found many heroic women who went to war and fought against the enemy by arming themselves In the *Rigveda*. So based on these evidences, it can be assumed that women in that era were at the forefront of everything.

If we look at the marriage customs in that period, we can say that there was understanding and harmonious relationship between the married women and their in-laws. There were various *mantras* in the *Rigveda*, where we see the respect towards the newlywed bride

"Samrajni swasure bhava samrajni swasram bhava /
Nanandari samrajni bhava samrajni adhidevesu //"
(*Rigveda*, Mandal-10, Sukta-85, Mantra-46)

Women as also control over their '*parinayya*' which referred to the gifts they received at the time of marriage. However, they did not have ownership rights over the family property, as it was considered to belong to their husbands. It has been proved from the *Brahmana* and the *Samhita* books that polygamy was accepted in that time, but polyandry was not. But the most remarkable thing is that, they accepted widow remarriage. They strictly prohibited 'child marriage' and '*sati pratha*' in that period.

Education system:

In the era of *Rigveda*, education aimed at overall development of an individual. Besides teaching of the Vedas or any other texts, they also provided practical training to the students to build their skills. The pupils were also asked to go begging. First, they have to go to the wife of their guru and then to their mother. Through this practice, they teach students to be humble. It is described in detail in the '*Satapatha Brahmana*'. It is apparent that, in the period of Rigvedic civilization, education was compulsory for all the three upper *Varnas*, except *Sudras*. After the *Upanayana* ceremony, students had to go to the *Gurukulas* for learning,

where they learn everything. *Upanayana* was considered as their second birth; hence they were called as '*Dwija*' meaning, two times birth. The holy verses of the Vedas were passed down orally from one person to another. This process was mainly Hereditary. The study of the Vedas is called '*Swadhyaya*'. The relationship between the teacher and the disciple was very pure. The disciple regarded the teacher as his father and the teacher loved and advised the disciple like his son. Before starting the class, the teacher always uttered a verse,

“Om saha navavatu saha nou bhunaktu saha virjyam karavahai /
Tesusvi navadhitamastu ma vidvisavahai //”
(Kathopanishad, Dr. Ramranga Sharma &
Dr. Malati Sharma, Chapter-1, Verse-1, Page no- 2)

After completing their education, the disciples returned to their homes – a ceremony known as *Samāvartana*. After that, the students got married and started their household life. In the Vedic literature, several disciples' names were found, namely, Aruni, Nachiketa, Narada, Saunaka, Indra, Satyakama etc.

It has been observed that, during the Rigvedic age, there were no temples. They mainly worshipped the natural forces like *Agni*, *Indra*, *Vayu* and *Soma*, through fire offerings. So, from the above discussion, there is no doubt that, the Rigvedic society is rich from various aspects.

Conclusion:

It has been established that Rigvedic society was highly dynamic, with flourishing social norms and values. It has been established that the Aryans represented one of the most advanced civilizations of their time, especially in terms of knowledge, strength, and cultural development. In the introductory section, the meaning and significance of the Vedas were discussed, particularly why the *Rigveda* holds a prominent place among the four Vedas. During that era, professions were not determined by birth, as the caste system was still flexible and lacked rigid boundaries. In the Rigvedic period, cattle rearing initially served as the primary livelihood, but over time, agriculture gradually became the dominant economic activity. The educational practices of that era were aimed at fostering the all-round development of children. The teacher-student relationship was based on mutual respect and warmth. Their rituals, centered largely on natural elements, highlight a deep-rooted spiritual outlook. Nature held a special place in their lives, being regarded as a trusted companion and integral part of their existence.

The marriage system of that time reflected mutual respect and understanding between women and their in-laws. Women were highly educated, on par with men, and held strong positions in society. Despite the patriarchal nature of the period, women were respected and offered various opportunities. The study of Rigvedic society unveils many aspects of life during that time. However, after the Rigvedic period, significant changes occurred, especially in the caste system and the status of women.

From this study, we can learn valuable lessons about how to live and behave in society. Although there were certain limitations, the *Rigveda* continues to hold a special place in the hearts of citizens. This study not only highlights our history but also connects us to our roots by describing the socio-economic and cultural aspects of the time. The Rigvedic society offers numerous insights, as reflected in texts like the *Satapatha Brahmana*, *Gopatha Brahmana*, and *Chandogya Upanishad*. Through this study, we can compare the society of that era with

contemporary society and observe the changes over time. Each mantra of the *Rigveda* provides new information about the period, and a deep engagement with these texts enriches our understanding of the heritage and culture that continue to shape us today.

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